

Title: The Prince's Many Peoples: Kropotkin and the Ethnographic Search for an "Anarchist Modernity"

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Abstract:

This paper will engage with the overlapping histories of geography, ethnology, anthropology and the formation of anarchist thought. The Russian anarchist "Prince Peter" Kropotkin, in particular, thanks to his debates on "survival of the fittest" versus "mutual aid" as evolutionary strategies, placed the natural sciences at the very center of anarchist discourse. However, his "natural science" was born of a view of nature that included humanity within its domain, leaving its thinkers unafraid to engage with ethnology and anthropology, and allowing anarchist geographers like Reclus to dream of a universalized and yet relational human cartography. Both Kropotkin and Reclus sought evidence of alternative fundamental principles that would reveal a parallel trajectory for modernity – radically democratic, born of mutual aid, and constituted by free federation within difference. An "anarchist" modernity.

Drawing on the contemporary polemic between anarchist geographer Simon Springer and Marxist David Harvey, as well as Federico Ferretti's writings, this paper will aim to bring these still highly politically charged histories into our present moment. Through social movement anthropology it will seek to ask "How has this "old geographer" come to loom over today's mass of assemblies, occupations, and insurgencies that continue their fight for a new "commons"?" With the world's liberal center cracked and crumbling, locating this alternative modernity in our present moment seems all the more urgent, lest other, more inhuman cartographies, fill the vacuum.